The Casino of Possible Worlds: Why the Sceptics are Making a Bad Bet

Philosophy of mind is famously full of strange creatures: philosophical zombies, colour-deprived super-scientists, brains inexplicably in vats, teleportation gone wrong. These thought experiments populate our textbooks and guide our next-gen philosophers. They are often presented as a rigorous and precise methodology, but many of them share an awkward problem: the more imaginative they become, the less they resemble the reality we all experience, and the more divorced they are from the actual empirical evidence we have available to us.

A simple classroom activity helps to illuminate this problem.

In one of my lessons, each student receives two cards from my philosophy-themed deck. Every card displays the name of a philosopher alongside a number. The numbers are hidden, and the students do not look at their own cards until the round is over. In the first round, I tell them only the philosopher's name on my card. The name is random and bears no relation to the number. Their task is to guess whether their unseen card is numerically higher or lower than mine. Inevitably, they begin reasoning philosophically, perhaps that Plato is "higher" than Hume, or that Kant is "higher" than Mill. None of this helps them win the game, which is precisely the point. They are reasoning with the wrong kind of information, or rather, with the right kind of information needlessly removed.

In the second round, I tell them the number on my card, and their guesses immediately become more rational. Evidence is now available, probabilities become clearer, and their judgements are more grounded and reliable.

The aim of this exercise is to support Russell's best hypothesis approach to what I take to be a pseudo-problem, namely whether other people have minds. I think it goes further than Russell's pragmatic and common-sense conclusion and reveals something more general that students of philosophy should be aware of, which is that when essential evidence is removed from a judgement, what remains is guesswork and faulty reasoning.

By analogy, in answering the question of other minds, the card I have is a three, probably even a two, and the higher prediction, that other people do indeed have minds, is therefore one we are justified in choosing. And yet the sceptical position often assumes that the card I have is a seven, insisting that we can never know and therefore should not even speculate. Of course we can never be certain, but does certainty of knowledge exist anywhere outside mathematics and pure logic. The problem of other minds is sometimes presented as a fifty-fifty guess, like the toss of a coin, but that would be a poor strategy in a game of higher or lower, and arguably a poorer way to do philosophy.

The confidence I have in the existence of other minds is grounded in overwhelming empirical evidence. All human beings share the same basic brain structures, exhibit the same broad patterns of behaviour, and arise from the same evolutionary history. The likelihood that, despite all these similarities, you are the only person with an inner experience is as slim as betting lower on a two in a game of higher or lower.

In ordinary contexts, we do not suspend judgement when the evidence overwhelmingly favours one outcome. We recognise that uncertainty does not erase probability, and that rational belief is guided by the balance of evidence rather than by the demand for absolute certainty. To treat the problem of other minds as if it were a fifty-fifty guess is therefore to misrepresent the epistemic situation. It is to behave as though the card in play were a seven, when all available evidence indicates that it is much closer to the bottom of the deck.

How else could we reasonably explain the facts before us. How else could we account for a shared and highly complex brain structure, except by assuming that its function is to produce the same kinds of qualities and characteristics across individuals. And how else could we make sense of the evolution of consciousness, with its clear survival benefits and apparent role in guiding behaviour, except by assuming that it reliably appears wherever the relevant biological conditions are met.

The sceptical reply is familiar. We can never know for certain what it is like to be another person, and so the existence of other minds must remain permanently in doubt. But this demand for certainty sets a standard that is not met anywhere outside mathematics and formal logic. If applied consistently, it would undermine our confidence in the external world, the past, and even the continued existence of our own bodies. The problem of other minds only appears uniquely troubling because we are invited to ignore the evidence that normally guides our judgements, and then asked to treat that manufactured ignorance as philosophical depth.

In the end, the rational response is not to withhold belief, but to acknowledge what the evidence overwhelmingly supports. Other people have minds because they are like us in every relevant respect, and because the best explanation of the world we actually experience is that consciousness is a natural and widely shared feature of human life.

In illustration, David Chalmers has acknowledged that philosophical zombies are not conceivable in this world, since we know that conscious experience is evidently dependent on the brain. He therefore appeals to remote possible worlds in which such beings might exist. I think this move is inherently flawed. A being with the same evolutionary history, the same physical structure, and the same behavioural and self reports of experience is, as close to certainty as we ever reach outside mathematics and logic, the same kind of being. To deny that conclusion is to assume a difference without evidence and then treat that assumption as philosophically revealing.

What David Chalmers is really inviting us to imagine is not a human being without consciousness, but a very different kind of entity altogether, one governed by different rules of physics or physiology. We are then asked to determine whether such an entity is logically possible. We cannot do this in any meaningful way, because we do not know the science that would permit its existence. It is a common error in analytic thought experiments to strip away context and data and believe that you are still considering the same thing.

In the language of the game, Chalmers is asking us to ignore the deck we are currently holding and instead speculate about the rules of a deck in a different casino entirely. This may be a valid exercise in formal logic, but it is a poor way to play the hand we have actually been dealt. Philosophy, like rational decision making, should proceed from the evidence available, not from imagined conditions that deliberately remove it.

If such thought experiments are intended as illustrative analogies, then that is perfectly acceptable. They can be useful in showing how mind and matter might be conceived as separate in the abstract. But if their aim is philosophical insight into the nature of consciousness as it actually exists, then they fail. They are built on a method that removes precisely the information that should guide our judgement. They are not grounded in experience, and they deliberately distance themselves from scientific understanding. When that happens, we are no longer learning about the mind, but about the limits of imagination when it is asked to do the work of evidence.

The higher–lower game reveals a simple lesson for philosophy, which is that the quality of your reasoning depends on the quality of your information. This does not mean that we should abandon thought experiments. They have an illustrative role, even if they do not convincingly fulfil an ontological purpose. If we force ourselves to forget the structural and functional brain similarities and the evolutionary history we all share, then we can question whether other people have minds, just as my students could randomly guess

higher or lower based on nothing more than a philosopher’s name. But if we are seeking true knowledge, why would we ignore the evidence right in front of us?